

METHOD FOR POSITIONING OF WIRELESS MEDICAL DEVICES WITH SHORT-RANGE RADIO FREQUENCY TECHNOLOGY

DESCRIPTION

The following relates to the medical arts. It finds particular application in tracking
5 equipment and personnel in hospitals and other medical facilities, and will be described
with particular reference thereto. More generally, it finds application in tracking medical
equipment, wireless medical sensor arrays, medical personnel wearing or carrying cellular
telephones, personal data assistants, short-range wireless-equipped identification tags, and
other wireless communication devices, and other mobile devices having short-range
10 wireless connections in medical facility settings.

Hospitals and other medical facilities are rapidly moving toward wireless
networking of medical diagnostic devices, medical treatment devices, and the like.
Wireless networking enables rapid transmission of data to a nurses' station, floor monitor,
or other central monitoring location, reduces the number of wires and cables in patients'
15 rooms, and allows rapid hookup of devices to the medical facility network.

Additionally, it has been recognized that wireless networking provides convenient
device tracking. For example, in the context of an IEEE 802.11 wireless hospital network
infrastructure, the location of roaming network devices is already largely determined based
on which wireless access point has the strongest communication link(s) with the roaming
20 device. Existing network-infrastructure based tracking systems utilize and refine this
built-in network tracking capability to track wireless devices that are compatible with the
deployed wireless network infrastructure. Network tracking enables medical personnel to
rapidly locate mobile wireless networked medical equipment, which saves time and
manpower. In emergency medical situations the ability to rapidly locate networked medical
25 equipment can save lives.

These existing network tracking systems are limited to tracking wireless devices of
their specific wireless technology. Local wireless devices employing Bluetooth, ZigBee, or
other wireless technologies that are not network-compatible are not tracked. Such local
wireless technologies are commonly used for short-range communication. For example,
30 Bluetooth enabled cellular telephones, personal data assistants (PDA's), and the like are
carried by many medical personnel. The Bluetooth connectivity enables these devices to

communicate with the owner's personal computer or with other devices located in the same room or nearby. Bluetooth connections are also used to wirelessly connect medical probes, wireless vital signs sensor arrays, or the like with associated monitor devices. Bluetooth, ZigBee, and other local wireless links are generally limited to about ten meters or less, and
5 generally cannot connect with the 802.11 wireless hospital network.

The following contemplates improved apparatuses and methods that overcome the aforementioned limitations and others.

According to one aspect, a tracking method is provided for tracking a local wireless
10 device in a medical facility having a medical facility network. The local wireless device, which is not connected with the medical facility network, is detected based on local wireless communication between the local wireless device and at least one nearby network device that is connected with the medical facility network. A location of the local wireless device within the medical facility is estimated based on the local wireless communication
15 and information indicative of a location of the at least one nearby network device.

According to another aspect, a tracking system is disclosed for tracking a local wireless device in a medical facility having a medical facility network. A means is provided for detecting the local wireless device, which is not connected with the medical facility network, based on local wireless communication between the local wireless device
20 and at least one nearby network device that is connected with the medical facility network. A means is provided for estimating a location of the local wireless device within the medical facility based on the local wireless communication and information indicative of a location of the at least one nearby network device.

One advantage resides in improved tracking for non-networked equipment, devices,
25 personnel, and other items in a medical facility.

Another advantage resides in providing tracking of non-networked items in a medical facility without requiring additional communication hardware.

Yet another advantage resides in providing integrated tracking of both networked and non-networked items in a medical facility.

30 Numerous additional advantages and benefits will become apparent to those of ordinary skill in the art upon reading the following detailed description.

The invention may take form in various components and arrangements of components, and in various process operations and arrangements of process operations. The drawings are only for the purpose of illustrating preferred embodiments and are not to
5 be construed as limiting the invention.

FIGURE 1 diagrammatically shows a tracking system for a hospital facility capable of tracking both networked and non-networked devices.

FIGURE 2 diagrammatically shows connections between the hospital facility network and network devices, and local wireless communication between wireless network
10 devices and local wireless devices not connected with the hospital facility network.

FIGURE 3 diagrammatically illustrates estimating the location of a local wireless device not connected with the network based on signal strength of the local wireless communication.

FIGURE 4 shows a block diagram of a client program for detecting local wireless
15 devices that is installed on each network device capable of local non-network wireless communication.

An illustrated tracking system is described with reference to FIGURE 1, which shows a diagrammatic block diagram of the system, and with reference to FIGURE 2, which illustrates example components of the medical facility network, example wireless
20 network devices, and example local wireless devices. The hospital network includes a local area network 10 that wirelessly communicates with wireless network devices 12, 14, 16, 18. For example, as shown in FIGURE 2, the wireless network devices may include a vital signs monitoring station 12, a intravenous (IV) injection flow controller 14, a patients' monitor at a nurses' station 16, a vital signs transducer 18 carried by an ambulating patient,
25 and so forth. The illustrated wireless network devices 12, 14, 16, 18 are examples, and other devices can be similarly wirelessly connected with the local area network 10.

The local area network 10 typically includes a local area network server 20 and a plurality of wireless network access points 22, 24 distributed through the medical facility and connected with the local area network server 20 by wired Ethernet cables 26, 28.
30 Alternatively, a Token Ring or another wired network connection can be employed. The

network access points 22, 24 are distributed throughout the medical facility to provide substantially complete wireless network coverage for the facility, so that wireless network devices can communicate with the network 10 from substantially anywhere in the medical facility. Although not shown, in some networks wireless access extension points are
5 provided which wirelessly communicate with one of the wired network access points 22, 24 to provide extended network area coverage.

Network devices such as the vital signs monitoring station 12, the IV flow controller 14, and the nurses' station monitor 16 wirelessly communicate with the nearest or most strongly wirelessly coupled network access points 22, 24 in order to wirelessly
10 connect with the medical facility network 10. Additionally or alternatively, one or more software access points can be employed. For example, a computer 30 connected with the local area network server 20 by wired Ethernet cable 32 includes a software access point implemented by a wireless card (not shown) installed in the computer 30 and suitable software. Network devices such as the vital signs transducer 18 may wirelessly connect
15 with the software access point embodied by the computer 30 in order to wirelessly connect with the medical facility network 10.

The wireless network connections are indicated in FIGURES 1 and 2 by jagged connectors drawn using solid lines, such as the example labeled connector 36 connecting the vital signs monitor station 12 with the access point 22 of the medical facility network
20 10. (The remaining wireless network connections are similarly indicated by solid-line jagged connectors, but are not labeled with reference numbers in FIGURES 1 and 2). In some embodiments, the wireless network communication comports with an IEEE 802.11 local area network protocol; however, other wireless local area network protocols can be employed.

25 Some of the wireless network devices are roaming network devices. For example, the ambulatory vital signs transducer 18 moves frequently as the ambulatory patient roams the halls of the medical facility, and the IV flow controller 14 is frequently moved from room to room. Other wireless devices are less frequently roaming or may even be substantially stationary. For example, the vital signs monitor station 12 may generally stay
30 in the same patient's room for several days, and the nurses' station monitor 16 in some medical facilities may not move for years. Network devices which are not wireless, such as the computer 30, generally move infrequently or not at all.

A network devices tracking system 38 tracks the mobile or potentially mobile wireless network devices 12, 14, 16, 18. The network devices tracking system 38 is typically a software program or module executing on the local area network server 20; however, another computer or other digital processing hardware can embody the network
5 devices tracking system 38.

As a roaming wireless network device moves, its distance from the locked-in access point used for network communication changes. If the roaming wireless network device moves far enough, it may be switched over to another access point which is now closer. For example, if the ambulatory patient carrying the vital signs transducer 18 moves
10 away from the computer 30 (which embodies a software access point) and toward the access point 24, eventually its wireless network connection will switch over to the access point 24. Thus, the wireless network inherently includes the capability of performing a rough tracking of roaming network devices. The wireless network devices tracking system 38 more precisely determines the location of each wireless network device 12, 14, 16, 18
15 based on factors such as signal strength, triangulation of the signals received by several access points, or so forth. The wireless network devices tracking system 38 is limited to tracking network devices 12, 14, 16, 18 which are connected with the medical facility network 10.

With continuing reference to FIGURES 1 and 2, not all wireless devices are
20 network devices connected with the medical facility network 10. For example, local wireless devices 50, 51, 52 may include local wireless capability that is not compatible with the 802.11 wireless protocol or other wireless network protocol employed by the medical facility network 10. As illustrated in FIGURE 2, the local wireless device 50 is an infusion pump controlling an intravenous flow. The infusion pump 50 is wirelessly
25 connected with the IV flow controller 14 which controls the infusion pump 50 to set the rate of intravenous infusion. The local wireless device 51 is a cellular telephone carried by a doctor or other medical person.

In some cases, the local wireless device can be an autonomous sensor network. For example, an autonomous vital signs sensor network 52 includes wireless sensors
30 monitoring a patient's electrocardiograph (ECG), pulse rate, blood oxygen, and so forth. The vital signs monitor station 12 receives and displays the vital signs measured by the vital signs sensor network 52; however, the vital signs sensor network 52 is autonomous

and continues to monitor the vital signs of the patient even if the patient is taken outside of radio range of the monitor station 12, for example to be taken to a diagnostic imaging facility. Other examples of wireless devices that may be present in medical facility settings include wireless patient and staff identification bracelets or tags that include short-range
5 wireless transmitters that identify the patient or staff member to local monitors.

The local wireless devices 50, 51, 52 employ a non-network wireless communication protocol such as an IEEE 802.15.1 protocol (also sometimes called Bluetooth) , an IEEE 802.15.3 protocol, an 802.15.4 protocol (also sometimes called ZigBee), or the like. Bluetooth, ZigBee, and most other short-range wireless
10 communication protocols are incompatible with the 802.11 network protocol and other wireless network protocols. (The cellular telephone 51 is a local wireless device insofar as it includes short-range wireless protocol capability such as Bluetooth or Zigbee. The cellular telephone 51 also inherently includes longer-range wireless transmission capability in order to communicate with the cellular telephone network; however, the cellular
15 protocol generally is incompatible with the 802.11 network protocol and most other wireless network protocols, and so the cellular telephone 51 is not connected with the wireless medical facility network 10.) However, the local wireless devices 50, 51, 52 can communicate with each other when the distance between devices is within the short range of the local wireless communication capability, which is typically less than ten meters.

20 To locate these non-network local wireless devices 50, 51, 52, the network devices 12, 14, 16, 18, and optionally also other non-network local wireless devices, are used. In addition to being wirelessly connected with the medical facility network 10, many of these network devices include Bluetooth, ZigBee, or other non-network wireless connectivity, and various such network devices are generally present throughout the medical facility.
25 Accordingly, each network device 12, 14, 16, 18 having the requisite non-network local wireless communication capability performs occasional scans to detect local wireless devices within range that are also capable of communicating by the non-network local wireless communication protocol. In the illustrated configuration, the vital signs monitor station 12 detects the vital signs sensor array 52. The IV flow controller 14 detects both the
30 infusion pump 50 and the cellular telephone 51. The nurses' station monitor 16 detects only the cellular telephone 51. The vital signs transducer 18 does not detect any of the local wireless devices 50, 51, 52. Because Bluetooth, ZigBee, and other non-network local

wireless communication protocols are short-range, only nearby network devices are able to detect a given local wireless device. Moreover, some network devices may not have the capability to communicate using the requisite non-network local wireless communication protocol, and thus cannot detect even nearby local wireless devices.

5 The non-network local wireless communications are indicated in FIGURES 1 and 2 by jagged connectors 54, 55, 56, 58 drawn using dashed lines. Wireless communication 54 is between the nurses' station monitor 16 and the cellular telephone 52. Wireless communication 55 is between the vital signs monitor station 12 and the sensors network 52. Wireless communication 56 is between the IV flow controller 14 and the cellular
10 telephone 52. Wireless communication 58 is between the infusion pump 50 and the IV flow controller 14. These Bluetooth, ZigBee, or other local wireless communications 54, 55, 56, 58 are to be distinguished from wireless network connections following the 802.11 protocol or another wireless network protocol, such as the wireless network connection 36, which are indicated by jagged connectors drawn using solid lines. Moreover, it is to be
15 appreciated that the illustrated local wireless communications 54, 55, 56, 58 are a snapshot in time – as devices move about, communications may be dropped as communicating devices move apart from one another, or added as devices capable of local wireless communication come together.

As illustrated in FIGURES 1 and 2, some local wireless communications 54, 56 are
20 brief polling communications limited to detecting and identifying local wireless devices within range. These are typically not considered to be wireless connections, but rather are brief wireless polling communications. On the other hand, in some cases a network device may actually be wirelessly connected with a local wireless device for the purpose of substantive transmission of data, control commands, or the like. In FIGURES 1 and 2, two
25 example wireless connections are: (i) the local wireless communication 58 between the infusion pump 50 and the IV flow controller 14; and (ii) the local wireless communication 55 between the autonomous vital signs sensors network 52 and the vital signs monitor station 12. The substantive and prolonged nature of these local wireless connections 55, 58 are indicated by filling the corresponding jagged connectors with a dotted pattern in
30 FIGURES 1 and 2.

When nearby network devices 12, 14, 16 detect local wireless devices 50, 51, 52, they communicate information about the detected local wireless devices to a derived

positions manager 60. Typically, the communicated information includes an identification of the local wireless devices 50, 51, 52, which may for example be a media access control (MAC) address for each detected local wireless device. Optionally, an indication of the signal strength of the local wireless communication 54, 55, 56, 58 is also communicated.

5 Based on the local wireless communication 54, 55, 56, 58 and information indicative of the location of the detecting nearby network devices 14, 16, the location of the detected local wireless devices 50, 51, 52 can be estimated. Optionally, local wireless communication between two or more of the local wireless devices 50, 51, 52 (not illustrated) can also be used to aid in the locating.

10 Location information for roaming wireless network devices is suitably obtained from the network devices tracking system 38. In a medical facility employing a mostly wireless network infrastructure, the tracked wireless network devices may be sufficient to perform locating of the local wireless devices. On the other hand, if there are a significant number of wired network devices that are generally stationary, the location of these
15 stationary network devices is optionally also retrieved from a data file into which location information for stationary network devices has been previously entered. In this case, those stationary network devices which include Bluetooth, ZigBee, or another local wireless communication capability can also be used for detecting and localizing local wireless devices. The derived positions manager 60 estimates the location of detected local wireless
20 devices 50, 51, 52 based on the locations of the nearby detecting network devices 12, 14, 16 using any suitable locating method. Other *a priori* knowledge, such as room layouts, last known position and device portability, nature of the device (i.e., sensors 52 that remain associated with the same patient), and the like can also be used by the derived positions manager 60 in locating the local wireless devices.

25 With reference to FIGURE 3, one suitable method for estimating the location of a local wireless device based on local wireless communication is described. Specifically, the location of the cellular telephone 52 is estimated based on the local wireless communications 54, 56. The local wireless communication 54 between the cellular telephone 52 and the nurses' station monitor 16 is achieved using: (i) local wireless
30 communication hardware 64 installed in or integrated with the cellular telephone 52 employing a selected non-network local wireless communication protocol such as Bluetooth or ZigBee; and (ii) local non-network wireless communication hardware 66

installed in or integrated with the nurses' station monitor 16 employing the same selected non-network local wireless communication protocol. Similarly, the local wireless communication 56 between the cellular telephone 52 and the IV flow controller 14 is achieved using: (i) the local wireless communication hardware 64 of the cellular telephone 52; and (ii) local non-network wireless communication hardware 68 installed in or integrated with the IV flow controller 14 employing the same selected non-network local wireless communication protocol. In FIGURE 3, all three local non-network wireless communication hardware components 64, 66, 68 are Bluetooth cards installed in the respective devices 52, 16, 14.

10 In some embodiments, the derived positions manager 60 estimates the location of the local wireless cellular telephone 52 based on the signal strengths of the local wireless communications 54, 56. In the example illustrated in FIGURE 3, the signal strength of the local wireless communications 54 is substantially stronger than the signal strength of the local wireless communications 56, as indicated diagrammatically by a thicker jagged
15 connector representation of the wireless communication 54. This stronger signal for the wireless communication 54 indicates that the distance between the cellular telephone 52 and the nurses' station monitor 16 is smaller than the distance between the cellular telephone 52 and the IV flow controller 14. Accordingly, the cellular telephone 52 can be estimated to be relatively closer to the nurses' station monitor 16 and relatively further
20 away from the IV flow controller 14. In some embodiments, a more quantitative distance estimate is made, for example based on the assumption that the signal strength for an omni-directional wireless communication decreases proportional to the square of the distance from the signal source.

If the signal strength is not measured or is not communicated to the derived
25 positions manager 60, the distance between the local wireless device and a nearby detecting network device can be estimated as less than or about the maximum communication distance of the local wireless communication. This approach is simple and can be relatively accurate when the range of the local wireless communication is short. For example, Bluetooth and ZigBee devices typically have a communication range of about ten
30 meters, enabling localization to within about ten meters by this method. If only a single network device detects the local wireless device, then it may be sufficient to estimate the location of the local wireless device as substantially coinciding with the location of the

detecting network device, which will be accurate to within about ten meters for typical Bluetooth and ZigBee communication ranges.

If a local wireless device is detected by more than one network device (such as the cellular telephone 52 being detected by two network devices 14, 16) then the combination
5 can be analyzed to more closely estimate the location of the local wireless device. For example, a triangulation method can be employed, in which a circle or sphere around each network device is estimated having a radius corresponding to the determined distance between the network device and the local wireless device, and the intersection of the circles or spheres is the estimated location of the local wireless device.

10 In yet another approach by which the derived positions manager 60 can estimate the location of a detected local wireless device, if there is a substantive local wireless connection between the local wireless device and a network device, such as the illustrated local wireless connections 55, 58, then it is typically reasonable to assume that the local wireless device is in the same room as the connected network device. For example, it is
15 highly likely that the vital signs sensor network 52 is in the same room as the vital signs monitor station 12 when the sensor network 52 is wirelessly connected with the monitor station 12 to perform vital signs monitoring of a patient.

With reference to FIGURE 4, in one suitable embodiment a client program 70 is installed on each of the network devices 12, 14, 16, 18 that includes the capability to
20 communicate using the Bluetooth, ZigBee, or other local wireless communication protocol. The client program 70 performs operations that scan for local wireless devices and communicate detection of such devices to the derived positions manager 60. In an operation 72, the client program 70 causes the network device to employ the Bluetooth, ZigBee, or other selected non-network local wireless communication protocol to scan for
25 other devices having the requisite Bluetooth, ZigBee, or other local wireless communication capability. The detection results are compared with previous detection results stored in a local memory 74 on the network device in a comparison process operation 80. In the illustrated example, the local memory 74 stores a device identification, such as a MAC address, and the signal strength of the local wireless communication for
30 each detected local wireless device. The comparison process operation 80 detects addition of a new local wireless device (possibly indicating that a roaming local wireless device has moved into range), disappearance of a previously detected local wireless device (possibly

indicating that the roaming local wireless device has moved out of range), or a change in the signal strength of the local wireless communication (possibly indicating movement of the local wireless device). If a change is detected, the derived positions manager 60 is notified of the change in operation 82, and the local memory 74 is updated in operation 84.

5 After a delay 86, the process operations 72, 80, 82, 84 are repeated. In this way, any change in the detection status of any local wireless device within the range of the network device is timely reported via wireless connection to the derived positions manager 60; however, when nothing has changed, no wireless network communication traffic is generated.

10 The use of the client program 70 installed on each of the network devices 12, 14, 16, 18 advantageously reduces wireless network traffic and can speed up the local wireless polling operation 72. However, in some other contemplated embodiments the derived positions manager performs centralized polling by individually commanding each network device to perform polling and report results to the derived positions manager. The derived

15 positions manager performs the change detection based on the data received from the network device. These embodiments do not require installing remote client software on the network devices.

With returning reference to FIGURE 1, the location information can be provided to the user in any suitable manner. In some embodiments, a digital hospital map 90 is

20 accessed via the local area network 10 and displayed on the computer 30 or on another display device. The location of each detected local wireless device estimated by the derived positions manager 60 is suitably superimposed on the displayed hospital map. Instead of or in addition to such a graphical representation, the information can be listed; for example, each local wireless device can be listed along with the room in which that

25 device is disposed. Moreover, optionally the locations of wireless network devices determined by the network devices tracking system 38 is integrated with the locations of the local wireless devices to generate an integrated database of device locations that can be mapped or otherwise displayed.

Relating a location to the digital hospital map 90 can also be used to determine

30 which room of the medical facility contains the location. This type of analysis can be used by the derived positions manager 60 to determine which room contains the nearby network devices detecting a particular local wireless device. If all the detecting nearby network

devices are in the same room, the local wireless device is suitably estimated to also be located in that room. Similarly, where a local wireless device has an established local wireless connection with a network device, the room containing the connected network device is also generally a good estimate of the location of the wirelessly connected local
5 wireless device.

The invention has been described with reference to the preferred embodiments. Obviously, modifications and alterations will occur to others upon reading and understanding the preceding detailed description. It is intended that the invention be construed as including all such modifications and alterations insofar as they come within
10 the scope of the appended claims or the equivalents thereof.